Quality of Life

Educational Trends and Issues in Southern California

Barry Stern

As the 20th Century ends, improving education has become the top concern of Californians. Education is essential for creating a skilled workforce to compete in a global economy and for developing citizens who can preserve the values and principles of our democratic republic. Unfortunately, there is now intense concern that standards are not being met, and that California may lose its preeminent position as a consequence.

This essay describes and interprets educational trends in the 6-county Southern California region. Southern California, containing 44% of California's population, has 50% of her elementary-secondary students, 44% of the community college students, 38% of the state university (CSU) students and 37% of those enrolled in the University of California (UC). There are 200 school districts, 44 community colleges in 27 districts, eight California State University campuses (including the new Channel Islands campus in Ventura County), and three University of California campuses.

There is also a large and vigorous sector of private education. Almost 11 percent (336,000) of the region's K-12 students attend 2,210 private schools. Statewide, there are some 300 independent colleges and universities that enroll 218,000 students, and another 2,100 private post-secondary training and certificate programs that enroll another 300,000 students. The great majority of these programs are in Southern California, according to a 1992 study of the Bureau of Private Post-Secondary Education.

Enrollment Trends

As the largest region in the nation's largest state, Southern California's enrollment trends dominate. Over the last decade, the region's public school population grew rapidly (20%), as did the private school population, which increased 14 percent. Students who are classified as white declined from 40 to 30 percent of the total, while those classified as Hispanic increased from 41 to 51 percent. Concurrently, the proportion of students with limited English proficiency grew from 19 to 30 percent, primarily due to immigration, most of which has been from Mexico and Central America.

While K-12 enrollments have grown rapidly, higher education enrollments, reflecting the state's budgetary predicament grew much more slowly. This has resulted in greater competition for university slots. In 1997, the region's community colleges enrolled 636,000 students; the California State University's seven campuses enrolled 99,000; and the University of California's three campuses enrolled 63,000. Although California's fiscal situation is improving,

slow enrollment growth is likely to continue over the next few years, limiting the numbers who will be able to take advantage of higher education.

School Performance

Students in public schools in the region and in the state tend to perform worse than their peers in other states, and they have shown little improvement over the last decade. Scores on several tests—the Stanford Achievement Tests, college admission tests (SAT and ACT) and National Assessment of Educational Progress show that students tend to score below national norms and worse than students from other populous states having large immigrant populations.

Younger California students rank near the bottom in math and reading. The 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed that only one-fifth of our fourth-graders are proficient in reading, and 52 percent are virtually illiterate (i.e. "read below even a basic level of ability"). Although total scores were five points better than in 1994, the new scores merely pulled the state back to 1992 levels. Only 22 percent of the state's eighth-graders were deemed proficient readers. In 1996, the NAEP assessment showed that only 11 percent of California's fourth graders and 17 percent of eighth-graders are proficient in math.

Although the SAT scores of high school seniors have been improving since the mid-1990's, they are still at about the level of a decade earlier, except in Orange and Ventura counties, where the SAT scores have risen steadily. High school graduation rates remain stuck at just under two-thirds, ranking California just 37th in the nation.

As can be expected, children from higher income and status areas tend to score better than those from lower or middle income areas, but there are also many examples of middle and lower income schools where children do perform as well as those in the wealthier districts. For example, among 11th graders taking the Stanford tests in five academic subjects, 42 percent of the low socio-economic status (SES) districts scored higher than the mid-point of the middle SES districts; and many middle and low SES districts scored higher than higher than some high SES districts.

The region's academic scores clearly are pulled down by the large number of limited English proficient (LEP) students--30% overall, 20% in 8th grade, and 14% in 11th grade. Nevertheless, California students, half of whom reside in the region, perform worse on National Assessment of Educational Progress tests than students in other large states that have large immigrant populations and high percentages of LEP students, such as Texas, Florida, and New York.

Qualifying for College

More students are taking steps to prepare for college, even while admission requirements are becoming more rigorous. However, a smaller percentage are satisfactorily completing all the courses and tests required for admission to the state's public universities. At the seven CSU campuses in

Southern California, the great majority of those who are able to gain admission must take remedial English and/or remedial math before they may enroll in for-credit classes.

Explaining Performance - School Investments and Policies

There are many plausible hypotheses to explain the generally poor performance of our schools:

- **Inadequate funding:** California is a high cost state, yet its $5,327 per student is a full $1,000 less than the national average. Moreover, the purchasing power of funds allocated per student has declined from $5,829 in 1989-90, a real decrease of 8.6 percent. Nevertheless, many school districts on the lower end of the per-student expenditure scale do perform better than a number of districts that spend more and/or are located in areas where family income is higher. Clearly, funding and the economic background of students are not the only factors for success.
- **Inadequate standards and accountability:** There are few consequences for poor performance. Students who perform poorly are promoted, graduate and even are permitted to enter college. Yet there is little or no linkage between student performance and teacher and administrative compensation. To improve accountability, the state is considering initiatives such as an exit exam for high school students, peer review of teachers, criteria for progressing from one grade to another, and school report cards that permit more inter-district and inter-school comparisons than current versions.
- **Teacher salaries high relative to available funds:** Whereas California ranks 41st in the nation in per student funding, it ranks 9th in teacher salaries. With so much devoted to their salaries, teachers must teach bigger classes (California ranks 50th); and there are fewer funds available for technology (ranks 47th in students per computer), pupil services (ranks 51st in students per librarian and guidance counselor), and administrators (ranks 50th in students per principal or assistant principal). Although California teachers are better paid, they also have a much higher cost of living, so that the question of value received per dollar spent on their salaries can't be tested unless the salaries are matched to purchasing power.

  The disparity in teacher salaries relative to other spending may be narrowing, inasmuch as between 1994 and 1997 teachers increased slightly as a percentage of all school personnel, while the percentage of school expenditures for teacher compensation dropped slightly. This suggests that the new teachers have less experience and credentials and thus are less expensive than the veteran teachers in the system

Essay

- **Too much paperwork and financial effort to administer state and federal categorical programs:** The proliferation of categorical programs, such as those that aid low income, disabled, and limited English proficient children, has required progressively more staff to administer them, leaving correspondingly less staff to provide direct instruction. Although many students benefit from these programs, as a whole they have not raised the achievement levels of California's students. A case in point is the recent disclosure that the federal government's major aid program, Title I, has had little impact on the achievement levels of low-income students.

- **Infrastructure demands:** The influx of thousands of new students has accelerated the need to repair old schools, build new ones, and increase the capacity to transport students. Although voters have approved several bond issues to address these demands, the need may be growing faster than the ability to expend funds efficiently to address them.

- **Too much bureaucracy and central control:** Although many school districts in the region are attempting to provide more autonomy to local schools, progress is slow. Along with reluctance of some central school districts to relinquish power, a plethora of state and federal regulations make decentralization difficult. While charter schools provide considerable autonomy and freedom from these regulations, only one percent of California's school children attend them, and evidence on their effectiveness is mixed.

- **Lack of Incentive Structures and Limitations on Choice.** School districts offer staff few incentives to attract students into their schools and to meet or exceed student performance standards. However, growing percentages of Californians favor the incentive of competition and parental choice of schools, including the use of charter schools and school vouchers.

- **Inadequate workforce preparation and applied learning.** The rigid structure and orientation of our educational system toward university preparation has made it difficult to respond to changing demands from the employment marketplace, with the result that, when compared to other nations, our graduates have little understanding or capacity to perform in the marketplace. Moreover, the lack of work-related curricula and experiences harms the academic performance of students who learn best by doing and when knowledge is applied to solving "real world" problems. This happens to be the majority of the population.

Now the Good News: There is evidence of improving student attitudes. More high school students demonstrate their hope for the future by taking more college prep courses.

Schools are becoming more productive. Although real spending per student has declined slightly over the last decade, student performance has remained constant. Thus, schools are doing the same with less. This is no small accomplishment given the explosion of enrollments and the

fact that greater percentages of students are limited English proficient, come from single parent families, and/or live in poverty.

School-to-career programs are being set up in many districts and have many positive elements: more involvement with business, integration of curricula, tech-prep programs that jointly prepare students for work or college, etc. However, it is less clear that these have sufficiently changed the structure of education, or that enough students have participated in them, to produce overall gains in student achievement.

More computers and wiring of schools for the Internet are providing California educators with additional tools to individualize instruction, motivate students, and access information to improve performance. The challenge for schools is to change their practices in order to take full advantage of these new technologies.

An improving budget situation is giving financial relief to schools. Recent legislation has dramatically reduced class size in Kindergarten through Grade 3, and efforts are underway to extend this to other grades. Finally, a new governor has taken office promising to build on the state testing and reduced class size initiatives of his predecessor and to make public education his first priority.

And, reflecting a sharp decline in crime rates in society, fewer school incident rates are being reported in the region.

Implications for Transportation

The combination of a burgeoning school population and large numbers of school dropouts unable to compete for high-skill, high-wage jobs will make profound demands on our transportation system. Obviously, more students, teachers, and other staff will travel to and from schools and colleges. With a need for more schools, more trucks and vehicles carrying construction equipment will also be on the road. Although new construction may cut down on school/college travel distances, it could also increase the number of trips as more people take advantage of increased educational access.

More subtle is the impact that will be made by large numbers individuals who graduate or leave school without the skills needed to support the addition of well-paying jobs in the region. These individuals will earn lower wages and thus be more likely to live in apartments than houses and in relatively low-cost areas. They may experience more difficulty in getting to where the jobs are and thus have longer commutes. At the same time, a larger population will depend on public transportation. Those who drive will own older, more polluting cars.

Clearly, the standard of living in Southern California is going to depend largely on how successful we are in improving the quality of our schools. In shaping educational initiatives, however, it is important to also consider their impact on an already burdened transportation system. To minimize travel for educational purposes, regional planning and interagency collaboration will become paramount as

the need intensifies to make a range of high quality educational options accessible to people in the vicinity where they live.

The picture is thus a mixed one. Because the problems are significant, we have put them at the head of the agenda. The progress already shown is encouraging, and should provide additional stimulus to attack the rest. It is up to all of us, whether private, governmental or non-profit, and whether local, state or national in scope, to respond constructively to the challenge of creating a better educational system.

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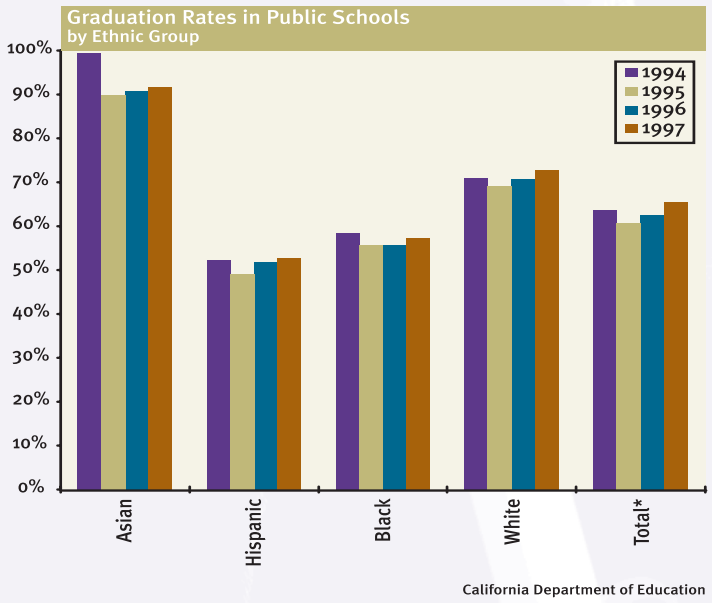
Education

Education is one of the most important indicators of the economic health and social vitality of the community. Good education helps citizens achieve their full potential. In addition, a skilled workforce is necessary to compete in a global economy.

Figure 26



California Department of Education

Students without a high school education are less likely to be qualified for the advanced technical training that the 21st century will demand. The graduation rate for the region has improved slightly, from 63 percent in 1996 to 66 percent in 1997. However, there are pronounced differences among the various ethnic groups. Between 1994 and 1997, the average graduation rate for Asians was 93 percent, compared to 52 percent for Hispanics and 57 percent for African Americans.

According to the California Department of Education, on the average, high school graduates earn about $6,000 more per year than high school dropouts. The Educational Testing Service on Urban Education estimates that, in a lifetime, dropouts will earn $212,000 less than high school graduates and over $812,000 less than college graduates.

Public opinion polls consistently show that Californians consider education their top priority. However, California ranked 31st out of the 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia in federal education dollars distributed per student during the 1998 fiscal year for kindergarten through 12th grade programs. The nearly $17 billion allocated covered programs ranging from instruction for disabled children to acquiring computers for the classrooms. And, under Title I which targets $7.3 billion annually to assist students living in poverty, California ranked near the

Table 15

Federal Education Dollars, 1998

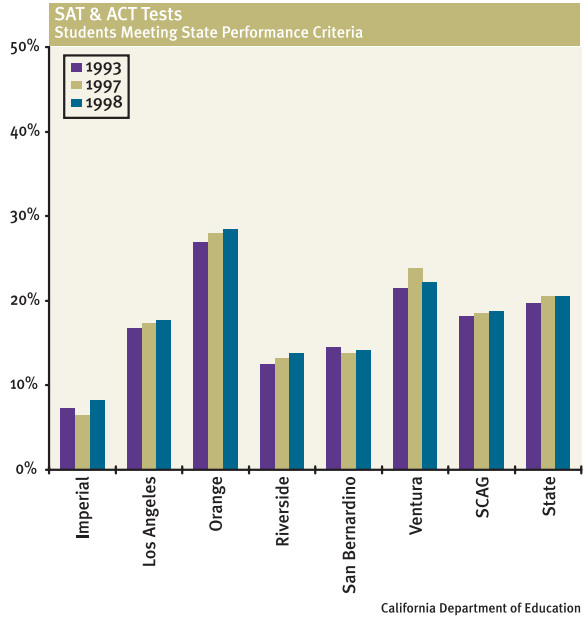
Rank	State	$ per pupil
1	Alaska	$1,110.15
10	New York	471.53
19	Michigan	392.17
22	Pennsylvania	377.25
25	Illinois	369.76
27	Texas	365.80
31	California	347.85

Source: California Department of Finance and SCAG

bottom in spending per pupil. California received an average of $347.85 per pupil in federal education dollars, compared to Alaska, which received $1,110.15 per pupil. The national average per-pupil expenditure was $371.45.

A strong general education is essential to ensure a more prosperous future for every one in the community. The performance of students on standardized tests is an indicator of the students' ability to gain admittance to colleges and universities and acquire the skills to compete for quality jobs.

Figure 27

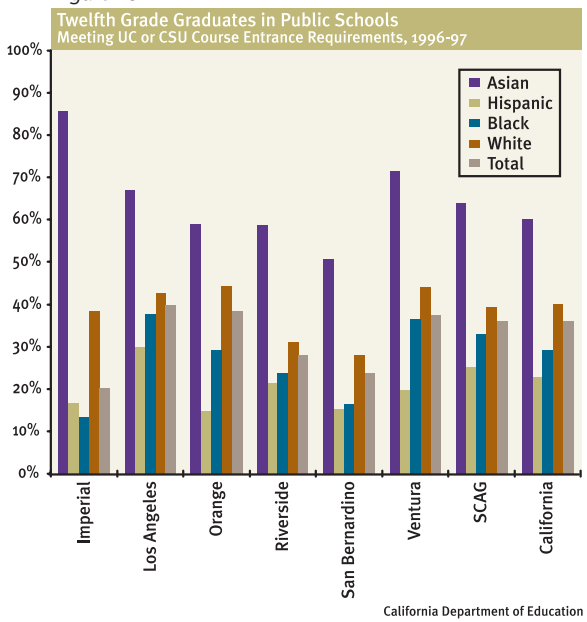


The SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test, or Reasoning Test) and the ACT (American College Testing) are administered to high school students for admission to colleges and universities. The SAT measures verbal and mathematical reasoning abilities, while the ACT measures educational development in English, math, social studies, and natural sciences.

Average total SAT scores for public schools range from 917 in Imperial County to 1069 in Orange County, according to the 1998 tests. Nationwide criteria are a score of 1000 or better on the total SAT test and a score of 21 or better on the composite ACT tests. The proportion of students in the region meeting the nationwide criteria for both SAT and ACT tests in 1998 were 19 percent, compared to 21 percent for the state. The breakdown by county of students meeting the nationwide criteria are: 8 percent in Imperial, 18 percent in Los Angeles, 28 percent in Orange, 14 percent in Riverside and San Bernardino, and 22 percent in Ventura.

A higher proportion of students in the region met the nationwide criteria for the SAT and ACT tests in 1998 than in previous years since 1993, the first year for which comparable data are available. In 1998, Orange County had the highest percentage in the region of students meeting the nationwide criteria. Over one-fourth of all students taking the exams in Orange County have consistently met that criteria.

Figure 28



While a post-secondary education is increasingly becoming essential for high-skilled jobs, data on public high school graduates show that approximately one-third of all graduates in the region (36 percent) took the necessary courses in 1997 to meet the requirements for admission to the University of California or the California State University. The distribution among ethnic groups was 64 percent of Asians, 25 percent of Hispanics, 33 percent of African Americans, and 39 percent of Whites.

California is joining a growing number of states strengthening accountability systems for student performance. Over the past two years, the State School Board adopted California's first set of academic standards for reading, math, science, and history. The standardized Stanford 9 (STAR) exams given last year for the first time establish a baseline for comparison in future years.

Parents and teachers, as well as business and political leaders, agree there must be an accountability system for schools; however, there are still many issues that need to be resolved in designing an accountability plan for California's schools that all groups will accept. For example, how does one measure the achievement of students not fluent in English? How does one compare the performance of schools in affluent suburbs and those in impoverished urban neighborhoods? How does one compare the work of experienced, trained teachers, and teachers on emergency permits? With mandatory class reductions and an increasing student population, a larger number of experienced, well trained teachers will be essential.

The Standardized Testing and Reporting program (STAR) was authorized by Senate Bill 376 in October 1977, and the Stanford Achievement Test Series (Stanford 9) was designed as the 1998 STAR test. All students in grades 2 through 11 were required to be tested in the spring of 1998. Students in grades 2 through 8 were tested in reading, math, written expression, and spelling. Students in grades 9 through 11 were tested in reading, writing, math, science, and history/social science. (Please see map 21 for the performance of eleventh grade students on the STAR tests.)

The results for 8th grade students in the SCAG region scoring above the 75th national percentile range from 7 percent in Imperial County (Math and Spelling) to 30 percent in Ventura County (language). The percentages of students in the 11th grade scoring above the 75th national percentile for the various subjects tested were higher than the percentages for eighth graders, including 40 percent of students in Orange and Ventura counties who scored above the 75th percentile in social science. However, as expected, the percent of Limited-English-proficient students scoring above the 75th national percentile was extremely low.

The table below compares the average scores for eighth and eleventh grade students in California with the average "best scores" in other states. Besides California, eight other states are included in the study.

NOTE: The norming sample for the Stanford 9 test included students representative of a national cross section of students. The sample included students from the northeastern, midwestern, southern, and western regions of the country and was representative in terms of ethnicity, special education status, English language proficiency, urbanicity, and socio-economic status. Results from this year's test establish a baseline to allow for comparison in future years.

Table 16

Comparison of Statewide STAR Program Scores With Other States, 1998

	California		Best Scores	
	8th Grade	**11th Grade**	**8th Grade**	**11th Grade**
Reading	44	37	65 (South Dakota)	60 (Utah)
Math	45	46	69 (South Dakota)	68 (Utah)
Language	47	43	63 (W. Virginia)	60 (W. Virginia)
Science		44		67 (S. Dakota)
Social Science		54		72 (S. Dakota)

Source: California Department of Education and Harcourt Brace & Company

As shown in the chart on enrollment in public schools from Kindergarten through the 12th grade, between 1988 and 1998, there was a 20 percent increase in enrollment in the region's public schools, ranging from a 15 percent increase in Imperial County to a 35 percent increase in Riverside County. The charts on enrollment in public schools by ethnicity and on students who are limited- English proficient highlight the increasing diversity of the student population in the region. (Please see map 22 for the distribution of limited-English-proficient students.)

(Please see World Regions for a discussion on education in the industrialized world.)

Figure 29

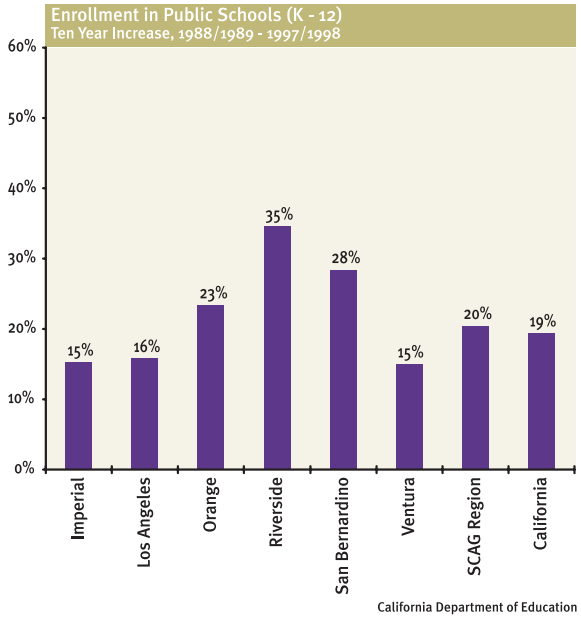


Figure 30

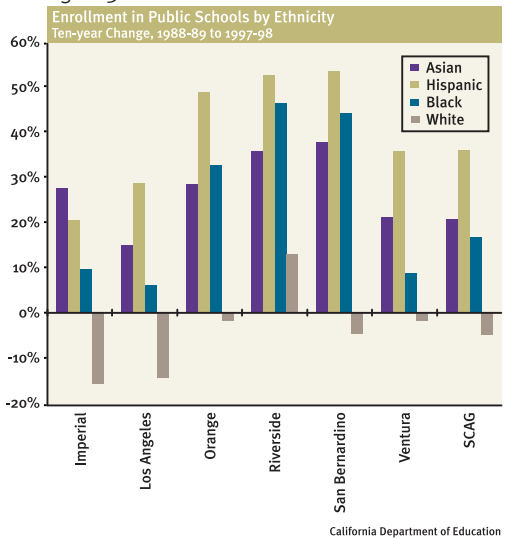


Figure 31